DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 656 PS 017 322

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TITLE Children's Free Play: What Has Happened to It?
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Needs; Early Childhood Education; *Educational Practices; *Play; *Preschool Children
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Pressure; *Formal Education

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the current abandonment of children's free play--a proven, broad-based, indispensable learning experience--in favor of formal learning and instruction. Educational research has found that play is the natural learning medium of children, yet this understanding is not guiding educators' practice. This condition has caused many children's advocates great concern: enough for them to plead for caregivers to allow children to be children, and in particular, to provide children with a stimulating and caring atmosphere that is supportive of their learning. It is maintained that in such an atmosphere, children acquire improved self-esteem and enthusiasm for learning. Parents, teachers, and all others concerned with children's welfare are urged to carefully consider the present move toward universal preschool education. (Author/RH)

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Children's Free Play: What Has Happened to It?

Susan Partridge

Abstract

This paper is addressed to the current abandonment of children's free play, a proven, broad-based, indispensable, learning experience, in favor of more-formal learning. Even the toys and games children are given now are supposed to teach them something, probably not of their own choosing, and, in the case of interactive toys, something questionable as to its value. Examples of children's free play are offered in contrast.

Educational research tells us that play is the natural learning medium of children, and it has been called "the province of childhood over which children hold the power," yet this is not being observed in practice and has caused many children's advocates great concern, enough for them to make a plea to let children be children by providing them with a stimulating and caring atmosphere, supportive of their own learning. It is truly believed that in this kind of atmosphere that better self-esteem and an enthusiasm for learning can be acquired.

Parents, teachers and all others concerned with children's welfare are urged to carefully consider the present move toward universal pre-school education, as younger children will be involved and more damage done if the programs aren't designed in the best interests of the preschoolers concerned.

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Children's Free Play: What Has Happened to It?

In Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, edited by Coulson, J. et al (2), childhood has been defined as "the time between birth and puberty." Longfellow called the hour between the dark and the daylight "the children's hour." The time of childhood might be referred to as "the children's time," a time of life occurring only once and critical to the formation of personality. If handled incorrectly by adults, it can be the difference between a child's growing up to become a happy and productive citizen or an unhappy adult falling far short of what he/she might have been as a person and as a productive citizen. Jessica Davis (3) called play "the province of childhood over which children hold the power," but do they?

The current move toward universal preschool education, the fact that a number of parents seem to be trying to make super-stars of their children and the availability of an abundance of children's toys, many of which are considered questionable by those concerned with children's welfare, have all prompted concerned adults to make a strong plea for the restoration of children's free play and so let children be children.

Brian Sutton-Smith (10) has been commended for his treatise on what he calls "the domestication of early childhood play." Professor Sutton-Smith feels that the use of toys in the pre-schools of East Germany to develop the socialist personality is absurd, but "no less absurd than our own efforts to generate toys

for the development of the achieving personality." He adds, "Much of the $12 billion we spend each year on toys is, after all, accompanied by an ideology which suggests that buying these toys will help our children's learning and development."

Another serious concern about some toys is clearly expressed by Nancy Carlson-Paige and Diane Levin (1) who have written about the dangers of interactive toys. They explain, "Equipped with toy guns that interact electronically with the television, children can now participate in the killing they formerly only watched." They add, "Such toys, in addition, impair the development of imagination and the formation of political ideas in children." Many other toys, not as dangerous as the above-mentioned, seem connected with television, and, as the authors say, "Children's play has been losing its inventive, personalized quality and is looking more like an imitation of television."

Parents have a grave responsibility to see that the toys provided for their children are not detrimental to the children's normal and healthy development. However, as Carlson-Paige and Levin say, "There are limits as to what parents can accomplish alone. Rather than place the entire burden of socialization on them, we must as a society assume the collective responsibility for providing children with a healthy, constructive climate in which to play and develop. The elimination of interactive toys would mark a significant beginning in the creation of such a climate."

Apparently, there is progress in regard to society's

assuming the collective responsibility as indicated by the appearance of an article, every now and then, in a reputable educational periodical. Very recently, one entitled, "Foundations Saying 'We All Have a Stake' in Schools," by Lynn Olson (8) was most encouraging, for, historically, philanthropic interest in public schools has been extremely low.

Their strong belief in the value of children's free play has prompted some very concerned people to speak out strongly against what they believe we are doing to it. Some examples follow:

Early Childhood Counselor, Ara L. Nugent (7) one who commended Professor Sutton-Smith for his article on what he called the "domestication" of early childhood play, wrote, "Perhaps we are on our way to creating robots who follow directions and who are unaware of cooperative efforts with others." She concluded her letter of commendation with, "How expedient. But how tragic for the children."

Jessica Davis (mentioned earlier), who also commended Professor Sutton-Smith, spoke of the "disempowered" children and said that she recoils at the thought of what sort of adults they will become.

As to a possible solution to the problem, Professor Sutton-Smith makes a plea for regular recess periods during preschool and childhood age levels. His plea prompts a vivid recall of many happy recesses experienced decades ago, a few of which are offered as examples of free play.

In the spring when the sap began to flow, Frank, a boy of

about six or seven, would bend a sapling to resemble the driver's wheel for "his imaginary car." He raced around and around on foot steering in and out among the children at play. On occasion, he would drive very close to, but never hit, a young girl, to show how adept at driving he was and, in the opinion of others, to enjoy her screams. To the delight of many, Frank imitated all the sounds connected with his driving -- starting the motor, accelerating, braking properly, braking abruptly to avoid hitting someone, blowing the horn, etc. Actually, when Frank was absent, his driving and accompanying sounds were sorely missed by many of the children.

Another memory is that of little girls gathering twigs and tying them together to make brooms to sweep leaves from their houses which actually were areas among the trees which they designated as the various rooms -- the kitchen, the dining room, etc. Often they would persuade the littlest boys and girls to be their children. Their parenthood was very protective most of the time, but it could be assertive, and amusing, when a child "got out of order." Sometimes a little one would act out just to test a parent, but, basically each family was a happy one.

Still another happy memory, "a home incident", which was a good learning experience as well was the damming of a brook to make a wading pool. Back and forth, back and forth with handfuls of mud and the speed of lightning, two young girls had built what seemed to them a good dam, but they soon learned that there was a small leak in their structure which soon became larger and

larger, only to leave no trace of the girls' hard work. Not to be daunted, the two began hunting for rocks. This time they built a sturdy dam and enjoyed wading in their pool. Later, when the poem, The Leak in the Dike, by Phoebe Carey, was presented (See Dean, E., ref. 4) in their English class, it was with no trouble that the two girls related well to it and, probably, enjoyed it more.

It is remembered that the "cops and robbers" the young boys played, both at home and at school, in no way resembled the "cops and robbers games" of today. There was no viciousness, no cruelty, no violence -- just fun. As a matter of fact, an offender spent scarcely any time at all in the jail which was usually a circle drawn on the ground. Supposedly, he got off for good behavior but, actually, it is believed that the cops had much more fun pursuing the offenders, and so used the "good behavior clause" to free them quickly.

Still another memory is that of a young boy and his sister who spent hours one Saturday making harness for their billy goat. Their plan was to hitch him to their express wagon and have him take them for rides. The children were accustomed to harness, for their father had several horses, and they had often watched him harness them. They used binder's twine to fashion each piece -- the bridle, the reins, the traces, etc. They were so well pleased with their finished products which they proceeded to use to harness Billy and hitch him to the express wagon. However, Billy wasn't one bit pleased. As a matter of fact, he refused to

cooperate, and no amount of coaxing could get him to change his mind. Though extremely disappointing, this was an important lesson for the children. Play is a cooperative, and they had not consulted Billy before undertaking the Herculean task of fashioning the harness for him.

Observation of the many "pretend games" -- pretending to be a teacher, a banker, a store clerk, etc. was a fine example of literacy at work. Kathleen Roskos' (9) study, "Literacy at Work in Play", offers examples of "the nature of literate behavior in the pretend play episodes of a small group of 4 and 5 year old children." She adds that in addition to serving their literacy development, their pretend play "may, in turn, inform our literacy teaching."

A recent observation lends support to the beliefs of many of those concerned that wherever there are children there will be free play unless dictated otherwise by adults:

Two very young children, a little boy and a little girl, accompanied by their sitter, were seated on a bench in an area of a large shopping mall, apparently, waiting while the children's mother shopped. Tired of waiting the two little ones stood up and began break-dancing. Their energy, their broad smiles, and the vigorous and sharply defined movements of every part of their bodies to a definite rhythmic beat were a delight to observe. Fortunately, this was in a less-traveled area of the mall, so it didn't interfere with the movement of shoppers. As a matter of fact, the few who came that way stopped to enjoy the delightful

"free show."

The intent is not to discredit play that is organized and supervised, for it has some merit, but it is not a substitute for free play. Every child can not make Little League, but almost every child can find or invent a game he/she enjoys and find someone compatible with whom to play. In addition to having fun, the experience will, undoubtedly, contribute to his/her total development.

In choosing sides for an organized ball game, the poor hitters, the poor batters, etc. are always chosen last. Surely, this doesn't do much for their morale. In free play, these children would be "the choosers" -- not the "losers."

It is felt that children's free play provides a broad-based education -- social, political, intellectual, physical, etc. It is well known that play therapy has contributed to child development, and that children's folklore which exemplifies the political education, has also been a contributor.

True play seems to have given way to formal learning as zealous parents "push" their children to achieve, and, as programs intended for later years are being introduced earlier, the children are, indeed, the losers. David Elklind (5) warns, "No authority in the field of child psychology, pediatrics, or child psychiatry advocates the formal instruction, in any domain, of infants and young children. In fact, the weight of solid professional opinion opposes it and advocates providing young children with a rich and stimulating environment that is, at the

same time, warm, loving, and supportive of the child's own learning. It is within this supportive, non-pressured environment that infants and young children acquire a solid sense of security, positive self-esteem, and a long-term enthusiasm for learning."

There are those who feel that children of today are far smarter than those of yesteryear. It is true that modern technology has provided a barrage of information, but, as Elklind says, "For children really to profit from this barrage of information, they must also be given the time and opportunity to reflect upon that experience. Yet parents today are spending less time talking with their children than in the past." This, of course, is not true of all parents, and the divided opinions among parents in regard to the forseen school-based child care is further evidence that much deep thought needs to be given to what works best for the children -- for all children.

Edward F. Zigler (11), who studied the issue for thirty years, concluded that a successful child-care system "must be tied to a known societal institution." This would provide for reaching the most children across socioeconomic lines. The system would be implemented as a second system in already existing elementary school buildings and would be operated by early-childhood specialists. Needless to say, the proposal would face many obstacles, but the fact remains, that the best interests of many young children are now at stake and that there must be some meeting of the minds if these children are to be provided

with an environment which Elklind has described as stimulating, warm, loving and supportive of the child's own learning. It is truly believed that this is the collective responsibility of society and that the goal can be reached if there is cooperation, communication and caring among the various segments.

It is concluded that free play is essential to the normal and healthy development of little children and that they should be provided with an environment conducive to this development and with the time to explore and enjoy the environment.

It is further concluded that Professor Sutton-Smith's plea for regular recess periods during preschool and childhood age levels be given serious consideration.

It is also believed that society must assume the collective responsibility for providing a climate in which little children can experience the delightful normalcy which is so rightfully theirs.

Finally, it is concluded that parents and voters must become involved in demanding programs that are in the best interests of the children and which, therefore, should include regular free play. Jean Marzollo (6) has offered some information on how four-year-olds learn best, followed by some advice for concerned adults as to how to get the best programs for the children. The advice is offered here as being well-worth the consideration of those adults concerned with that age level:

> And we, the parents and voters, should listen carefully and not be swayed by misty-eyed rhetoric about childhood. We should function as strong

children's advocates, asking questions and putting forth our demands for excellent programs. The 1990's will see more programs than ever for preschool children. Let's elect people who make sure these programs are good.

Implications for Parents and Educators

1. Provide a healthy, safe and supportive environment and the time for children's free play.
2. Bear in mind that educational research tells us that play is the natural learning medium of children.
3. Do not deny little children free play by pushing them into formal schooling too soon.
4. Observe and respect the uniqueness of the individual children as you guide them in a normal, happy and healthy development.
5. Remember that organized play, though it has some merit, is not a substitute for free play.
6. Read all the proposals on public pre-school education; listen to pertinent documentaries on TV; follow reports in reputable periodicals; and attend related workshops offered by various organizations. You will then have a basis of comparison which will enable you to come to grips with your own thoughts as to the best program for preschoolers -- all preschoolers.
7. Make your conclusions and your reasoning known to the authorities, and follow-up as part of your efforts.

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